Animal Health & Welfare NI
Sheep Health

AHWNI Flock Health Focus: Beware of Parasite Challenges Due to Mild Weather This Autumn- Consider The Tests Available

During the Autumn/Winter period, it is usually assumed that the highest risk period for gastrointestinal nematode (GIN- also known as gut worms) infection is over. Typically, by now, we would be expecting to see much cooler temperatures, with the possibility of frost. However, temperatures have stayed very mild so far this October. While this is great for grass growth, it can also mean a prolonged challenge from GINs.

October can also be a significant month for liver fluke challenge where many flock keepers may be considering routine dosing. However, it's important to take into account weather conditions over the past few months, and make use of testing available to decide whether dosing is required yet or not.

Faecal Egg Counts Can Provide Valuable Information

GIN larvae need damp, mild conditions to develop on pasture, while cooler temperatures can slow down development. It can take a prolonged period of very cool/sub-zero temperatures to kill these larvae off completely.

Damp and mild weather over the past couple of months likely mean that GIN burdens on pasture may still be very high. While this should not be a significant issue for breeding ewes/rams that are in at least their second grazing season, it's important to consider the effect this may have if any of this season's lambs remain on farm. These lambs may not have developed sufficient immunity to fight off infection yet.

Faecal Egg Counts (FEC) can be particularly useful at this time of year to assess the risk of GIN infection. These can be taken from both lambs and mature sheep. While pre-tupping dosing is not recommended and not usually required, FECs can still provide valuable information that may help to inform whether treatment is necessary to control late season infection and improve fertility rates. Most adult sheep will have immunity to infection, however *Haemonchus contortus* (Barber's pole worm) is a GIN species that some adults may not have been exposed to before and will have little immunity to. A very high egg count could indicate *Haemonchus* infection, but it's important this is discussed with your private vet before considering treatment.

Continuing to take FECs in lambs throughout the winter if mild conditions prevail can help to reduce any production losses associated with GIN infection, and provide useful information on parasite burdens in different paddocks, which could be used when considering turnout of lambs in the spring. When assessing results, it's important to discuss these thoroughly with your vet and take into account condition of lambs, weather, past treatments and where they are grazing.

Consider The Worming Product Used

If FEC results find a high level of parasite infection and it's been decided that treatment is essential, then it's important to consider the type of worming product used. If not already given earlier in the season, a 'break dose' can be useful.

A break dose typically involves the strategic use of a Group 4 (orange) or Group 5 (purple) wormer in lambs later in the grazing season. These are new Groups of wormer with few reports of resistance, however they must be used carefully to maintain their effectiveness, with recommendations that they are not used any more than twice in a year. These products can help remove worms that have survived previous treatments with older wormer groups, reducing the number of resistant worms contributing to pasture contamination and helping to preserve the effectiveness of existing treatments.

Sustainable Control Of Parasites in Sheep (SCOPS) recommends that after the use of these products, lambs should not be moved from their original pasture for at least 4/5 days. Moving them earlier can accelerate the establishment of resistance to these product groups.

Consider Testing for Liver Fluke Before You Dose

Liver fluke risk also depends on the weather, although it is also important to consider the type of land sheep have been grazing. Many flock owners may treat for liver fluke pre-tupping, however, this may sometimes be too early.

A wet and warm summer can mean that liver fluke has been developing rapidly in its host the mud snail during this period, resulting in earlier infections in sheep. It's important to consider the type of summer we have had in Northern Ireland. Prolonged periods of dry, hot weather during the summer may have halted activity from the mud snail. However, higher rainfall in September will have likely stimulated the hatching of liver fluke eggs.

Treating too early for liver fluke will result in a loss of money and time, as flukicidal products have no residual or long-lasting effect. At this time of year, if there are lambs still on farm grazing similar pasture to adults, a blood antibody test can be very useful.

This test shows whether sheep have been exposed to liver fluke or not. Antibodies are produced by their immune system and can be found in their blood in response to infection. The test can only be used in lambs in their first grazing season, as ewes that have been exposed to liver fluke before, even if it was during the year previously, will still maintain the presence of antibodies in their blood which will give misleading results. This test can detect liver fluke as early as 2/3 weeks after ingestion by lambs, and is a useful tool to use when considering timing of liver fluke treatments.



Testing of lambs can provide valuable information at this time of year about the timing of liver fluke infection and therefore the best time to treat.